New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1957

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Shinbone Alley"

The New York Times

April 15, 1957

Theatre: 'Shinbone Alley'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

AFTER wading in musical banality for quite a long time, it is pleasant to meet a show that at least aims at something fresh. "Shinbone Alley," which opened at the Broadway Saturday evening, falls short of the target, particularly in an aimless last act. But George Kleinsinger, who composed the music, and Joe Darion and Mel Brooks, who wrote the libretto, have tried to use the theatre to create a world of sardonic fantasy.

"Shinbone Alley" is based on Don Marquis' sequence of vers libre about archy, the eloquent cockroach, and mehitabel, the impulsive cat, who grappled helplessly with the intractable facts of life. Probably this is an intractable subject for a musical play.

On the one hand, it reduces Don Marquis' cosmic broodings to the level of a story; and, on the other hand, it attempts to sketch a love affair between a cockroach and an alley cat. Nothing Eddie Bracken, as archy, and Eartha Kitt, as mehitabel, do can make that relationship recognizable. Don Marquis' common sense saved him from trying it.

Putting the original verses aside for the moment, we have in "Shinbone Alley" a loosely-drawn lithograph about the insect and animal world with an amusingly garish score, several skittish ballets, a frowzy world of alley-cats on the loose, some humorous costumes designed by Motley, unhackneyed scenery by Eldon Elder and a general impression of ironic improbability.

Miss Kitt is not the battered, raffish mehitabel who was descended from Cleopatra. But she is a sleek, torrid cat who slips out of control whenever a tom struts by her, who dances with animal grace and sings with mocking plausibility. As archy, Mr. Bracken gives a delightful performance that is both common and winning. They have one excellent number together—"Flotsam and Jetsam," which they sing exuberantly.

•

The cast includes two other enjoyable performers—George S. Irving as a braggart tomcat who bullies the neighborhood; and Erik Rhodes as the theatre-trunk tomcat who dazzles mehitabel with fraudulent promises of a stage career and, in one especially original number with Miss Kitt, does something amusing with a song that lampoons The Method.

The world of cats is ideal for ballet. In Jacques D'Amboise, "Shinbone Alley" has a brilliant dancer, who leads a ferocious cat-and-dog scramble. With Allegra Kent, another gifted dancer, he puts a foundation under the vagrant second act with a beautifully designed number labeled "Vacant Lot Ballet." Rod Alexander has staged the ballets admirably.

•

If you are wondering how a coherent show could be made out of the archy and mehitabel verses, you are on the right track. Although the authors have arranged some odd and interesting episodes, they have not been able to pull the work together, especially in that second act, which slowly disintegrates.

Mr. Kleinsinger, the composer, is the man who has had most fun and been most successful. He has improvised an animal and insect world out of music with humor, drollery, street tunes and juke-box pandemonium; and the orchestrations, particularly for "Cheerio, My Dearie," are spontaneous and inventive.

Too bad "Shinbone Alley" does not really come alive as a stage composition. For the point of view is sly and original, and a good deal of the stage work is subtle, agile and imaginative.

"SHINBONE ALLEY"

Musical in two acts and twenty scenes, lyrics by Joe Darion, music by George Kleinsinger, book by Mr. Darion and Mel Brooks, based on "archy and mehitabel" stories by Don Marquis; dances and musical numbers staged by Rod Alexander; designed by Eldon Elder; costumes by Motley; lighting by Tharon Musser; orchestrations by Mr. Kleinsinger; presented by Peter Lawrence at the Broadway Theatre, March 13, 1957. The cast:

(Voice of Newspaperman.... Julian Barry)
archy.....Eddie Bracken
mehitabel.....Eartha Kitt
Phyllis.....Reri Grist
Mother.....Lillian Hayman
Ricky.....Dorothy Aull
Copper.....James Marley
Buzz.....Howard Roberts
Butch.....Moses LaMarr
Rusty.....Cathryn Damon
Big Bill.....George S. Irving
Broadway.....Ross Martin
Edie.....Gwen Harmon
Blackie.....Larry Montaigne
Gladys.....Carmen Gutierrez
Frankie.....Jacques D'Amboise
Tyrone T. Tattersal...Erik Rhodes
Shorty.....David Winters
Harry.....Jack Eddleman
Bartender.....Bruce MacKay
Penny.....Allegra Kent

DAILY NEWS

April 15, 1957

'Shinbone Alley' Has Wit, Kitt, Bracken and a Wonderful Score

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Dear archy, you may be only a poor humble cockroach, but you are a true friend of the theatregoer when you sing of your beloved mehitabel—and of Broadway the lightning bug and all the other creatures of the night—in "Shinbone Alley." This captivating whimsical musical was given an affectionate production by Peter Lawrence at the Broadway Theatre Saturday evening, and it brightens the musical comedy scene like a lightning bug. It is original, it is witty and it bubbles over with the happiest score in town.

"Shinbone Alley" is as unstereotyped as a show can get. Composer George Kleinsinger and librettists Joe Darion and Mel Brooks have fashioned it from columnist Don Marquis' fragments of vers libre concerning archy, the bug-sized Francois Villon, and mehitabel, the alley cat with a conscience too frail. With Eddie Bracken as the insect, Eartha Kitt as the kittycat and a fabulous pair of dancers named Jacques d'Amboise and Allegra Kent, the cast is a splendid one.

Music with Gusto

There isn't much of a story in "Shinbone Alley"—no boy-loves-girl stuff—for the cockroach only wrote his pieces for Marquis now and then over a period of years beginning in 1916—wrote them by diving on Marquis' typewriter one key at a time, which is why he couldn't make capital letters. Archy's look at the world from the under side was a tolerant one, but it had a sane perspective. Once he wrote—and Bracken says it—"a man thinks he amounts to a lot but to a mosquito he is just something to eat."

Kleinsinger's music is wonderful stuff, filled with the gusto of back-alley life, and an excellent orchestra directed by Maurice Levine plays it. I think the first trumpet and the man on the bassoon should have their names in the program. Perhaps the brightest of the musical highlights is a choral number in which a group of alley females croon a lullaby over a basketful of kittens while Miss Kitt, the mother of the litter, curses the babies in counterpoint.

Excellent Cast

But there are 22 songs and ballet numbers, ranging from the rollicking "Toujours Gai" to "Way Down Blues." They all are refreshing in a theatrical world which abounds in hack work.

Miss Kitt is an excellent choice for mehitabel, being sinuously feline and as good a dancer as she is a singer. Bracken, wearing a shallow brown derby and a horizontally-striped jacket, has great sweetness as the cockroach, although once he does get monstrously drunk on a jolt of DDT. Other admirable denizens of Shinbone Alley are Erik Rhodes, Ross Martin and Gwen Harmon. Rod Alexander has staged the dances with a free-wheeling imagination.

Motley, the costumers, have wisely not tried to make the company look like real bugs and cats. A suggestion is much better. The sets, by Eldon Elder, bring the characters down to size; one of the most effective is the enormous fireplace before which Miss Kitt basks in an unhappy period of employment as a house cat.

There is a real Shinbone Alley off Sullivan St., but the one at the Broadway Theatre is in the world of imagination—a happier world.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
April 15, 1957

THEATER

'Shinbone Alley'

By WALTER KERR

I HAVEN'T the faintest idea of how you could turn the enchanting "archy and mehitabel" stories of Don Marquis into a Broadway musical comedy—and neither does anyone at the Broadway.

This must be said in sorrow, not only because the wonderful back-fence world in which a cockroach and an alley-cat swap case-histories promises so much in the way of unrefined fantasy, but because the often talented folk of "Shinbone Alley" have gone about their work with such sincere and wistful good will.

* * *

They have even hit a live image here and there. If, for instance, the whole mock-sorrowful saga could somehow have been given the sharp black-and-white lines of a mountainous fireplace before which Eartha Kitt briefly sits sipping milk through a straw, the miracle might conceivably have happened. For a moment, as the lights go up on a mournfully housebroken "mehitabel" listening with positive revulsion to decent people calling her "kitty," the blend of a curled-up figure and a universe scrawled in crayon is just right.

Or, taking quite a different tack, the authors and designers summon up a kind of wild Disney raffishness for the time it takes to sing a Shinbone lullaby ("mother dear will be hustling") to a basket of highly illegitimate pussycats nestling in an ash-can. Once again the possible form of a possible show hovers suggestively, and fleetingly, over the stage.

* * *

In addition, the principals are willing to give this easygoing daydream their full, sober, warmhearted attention. Miss Kitt, as the "toujours gai" feline who was known to walk out on a tomcat just once (he was dead), strolls away from her unwelcome litter of kittens with a surly and discouraged "I see them" that summarizes in a bored sentence the immemorial way of all flesh (female or feline). She writhes and wriggles to a dozen insinuating tunes, rasps out her metallic staccato at the ends of long, liquid lines, and flips a trailing boa over a saucy shoulder with thoroughly fetching impudence.

* * *

And Eddie Bracken, cast as the cockroach who has managed to get everything down on a typewriter, joins the lady in a rollicking bit of soft-shoe ("Flotsam and Jetsam"), sings the unhappy ballad of a bumptious moth ("Do you play with fire because you like it, or because it's the conventional thing for a moth to do?"), and gnaws at an oversize apple-peel with light, friendly, off-the-cuff grace.

* * *

But the physical theater itself seems to defy this particular flight of insane fancy. When you read Don Marquis' little free-verse messages, you envision a real cockroach with moral problems, a real cat with a "wot-the-hell" shrug. These animals and insects are *people*.

The trouble, it would seem, is that you can't reverse the process. Wrapping Mr. Bracken in a horizontally striped jacket doesn't turn him into a multi-legged poet you can believe in; trading on the ferociously cat-like expression of Miss Kitt makes her seem much less cat-like, and much more human, than ever before. Flesh takes away a dimension, instead of adding one.

There is, too, a loss of that magnificently intimate conversational tone that the late Mr. Marquis developed for speaking with his underprivileged equals. Every now and then the sound of it filters through, with lyric overtones ("My heart has followed all my days something I cannot name"), but most of the time librettists Joe Darion and Mel Brooks are working the obvious mathematics of man-into-insect ("I am not a well bug," "We'll be wiped out to a bug," "I could lick you with five hands tied behind my back"). And the fact that the original pieces are a series of unlinked vignettes doesn't help the present authors to get a story rolling: "Shinbone Alley" is just a collection of variously introduced songs.

Some of the songs of George Kleinsinger are attractive, and I especially like the scoring for two left-field dog-and-cat ballets. Designer Eldon Elder's spidery fire-escapes are rickety splendors. But those two endearing philosophers, "archy and mehitabel," remain locked in their author's dusty desk.

Daily Mirror
April 15, 1957

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Shinbone Alley' Is A Surefire Kitt Hit!

• Eartha is Don Marquis' mehitabel to the life. Ditto Bracken's archy.

Can you imagine a musical comedy with an alley cat for a heroine and a cockroach for a hero? Neither could we—till we caught "Shinbone Alley" at the Broadway Theatre on Saturday evening. And we found it fascinating, for this amoral cat and philosophical roach think and act like people.

Some years ago, Don Marquis wrote a series of stories about archy, who recorded the wicked ways of his feline pal, mehitabel, by hopping up and down the keys of the columnist's typewriter. In the morning Don claimed to find the cucaracha's reports on mehitabel's gallivantings on a sheet of paper which he always left in the machine the night before.

CAPITAL LETTERS were too much for the diminutive archy to achieve. This insect Boswell, though fond of the misbehaving mehitabel, deplored her raffish outlook on life. He finally talked her into becoming a lady-like, pampered house pet—only to regret it. For an unregenerate mehitabel was fun, and a prim pussycat was not. So she drifted back to sinful Shinbone Alley.

Like such philosophers as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, archy could experience devastating periods of depression. Then he would try to commit suicide by gulping down double drams of DDT or lying in the pocket of a billiard table, hoping for a lucky shot to smash him. On one of his antenna-raising binges, he was joined by his friend—a bug called Broadway, because he could glow like a neon sign.

Broadway thought the dames of their sporting set a bad lot, too. But, poor fool that he was, he couldn't do without 'em. He could only gnash his choppers when they went on flings with rascals like Big Bill, the tough tomcat, and Tyrone T. Tattersal, a phony, furry femme-chaser.

* * *

EARTHA KITT is the slinky, seductive mehitabel to the life. A striking stylist, she knows how to stop a show with siren wiles, flashing eyes, undulating hips and torchy crooning. A dazzling Delilah, possessed of enormous vitality, she scored a triumph.

Eddie Bracken is marvelous as the peripatetic, poetic archy, an idealist at heart and a reformer by nature. His depiction of the little fellow, who wants to do good and finds it a dull business, is touching. Erik Rhodes, as a hammy actor-manager; Ross Martin, as the ineffectual, buffeted Broadway; and George Irving, as the muscular Big Bill, are all exactly right.

Jacques D'Amboise and Allegra Kent, from the New York City Ballet, stand out vividly in the exciting dance sequences choreographed by Rod Alexander. And Gwen Harmon is an eyeful as a footloose floozie.

* * *

JOE DARION and Mel Brooks have done an amazing job in adapting the esoteric essays of Don Marquis for the Main Stem. Their wordage gives the imaginative caper a "Guys and Dolls" flavor. **The score by George Kleinsinger runs the gamut of moods, and falls easily on the ears. Studded with candidates for the Hit Parade, it's one of the best we've heard over the past few semesters. Under Maurice Levine's baton, the orchestra did it justice.**

Eldon Elder and Motley have contributed sets and costumes that must have cost producer Peter Lawrence bales of bucks. Motley has been eminently successful in making the off-beat characters seem human. You'd recognize them immediately in sidestreet bistros or dime-a-dance palaces.

"Shinbone Alley" bowed into the Broadway to blasts of bravos and piercing whistles of approval. The customers greeted this newest milestone in musical theatre with chuckles and cheers, demanding encore after encore. It was ample proof that entertainment can be intelligent. Sophisticated and sexy. A Kitt hit!

New York Post

April 15, 1957

By Richard Watts Jr.

Story of a Cockroach and a Cat

One of the ideas involved in the nobly ambitious enterprise of turning the adventures of Don Marquis' endearing creations, archy, the cockroach, and mehitabel, the cat, into a musical comedy worked out perfectly. It was the casting of Eartha Kitt in the role of the seductive kitten. Nothing could be much more enchanting than Miss Kitt's wonderfully gay, sly, tender, savge and amazingly convincing impersonation of the feline reincarnation of Cleopatra. If only the rest of "Shinbone Alley," which opened Saturday night at the Broadway Theater, had been equally happy!

As a matter of fact, several other aspects of the musical adaptation by George Kleinsinger, Joe Darion and Mel Brooks of a humorous classic came off well. Eddie Bracken proved just the right choice for archy, mehitabel's adoring biographer. The settings by Eldon Elder and the costumes by Motley capture the proper mood. The lovely Allegra Kent and the agile Jacques D'Amboise are skillful and attractive dancers. And Mr. Kleinsinger has composed a delightful song called "Flotsam and Jetsam," which Miss Kitt and Mr. Bracken sing and dance to perfection.

The Story

Nevertheless, the final result is singularly ineffectual. Some sort of book was necessary for dramatizing the wistful friendship between the insect and the alley cat, and the Messrs. Darion and Brooks have tried to offer one in which mehitabel is always running off with some tomcat after promising archy to settle down. But it gets monotonous when it doesn't disappear altogether, and plot ideas emerge only to fade into nothingness. Nor does it seem to me that the insistent accounts of archy's dispairing attempts at suicide are exactly the cream of comedy.

By the time the second act has arrived, chaos seems to have taken over. There is, for instance, a ballet that sets new records for not being integrated into the narrative. A loudspeaker advises you that archy, in his loneliness, wrote many pretty stories, of which the tale of Penny was one. Thereupon Miss Kent and Mr. D'Amboise go into their big dance number. It's a charming one, too, but it struck me that much of its effect is dissipated because one's mind keeps being distracted by wondering just what it has to do with the adventures of our hero and heroine.

The Stars

I suppose, though, it is ungrateful to begrudge the two stars the opportunity for rest the interlude gives them, because they work like those proverbial Trojans. In truth, Mr. Bracken may have to labor a little too much, since, when the authors can't seem to think of anything else, he is asked to go into a scene of comic drunkenness. It eventually gets a trifle tiresome. Otherwise, he is extremely good, managing to be at once humorous, touching and likable. As for Miss Kitt, her feline grace, her sudden, fierce rages and her wistful moments of gentleness are irresistible.

In addition to the stars and the two dancers, there aren't many important performers in "Shinbone Alley," but George S. Irving is vigorous as a tough cat and Erik Rhodes is whimsical as an artistic one that tries to teach mehitabel Shakespeare—and, by the way, among the happy moments is when she swings "Romeo and Juliet." Indeed, there are so many good moments and Miss Kitt is cast to such perfection that the eventual confusion appears all the more upsetting.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

April 15, 1957

The Alley Queen's A Hep Cat Now

By TOM DONNELLY.

There are a number of good things in "Shinbone Alley" (at the Broadway), and a greater number of things that are not so good, none of them surprising, considering the source of the new musical.

It would take genius, and a lot of it, to put "archy and mehitabel," Don Marquis' lower case saga of a cockroach and an alley cat, on the stage with anything approaching brilliant success. The men responsible for the show at the Broadway can lay claim to talent, and industry and, I suppose, to daring, but they are not geniuses.

No, they have not attempted to costume Eddie Bracken, who plays archy, as a cockroach, and they have not clothed Eartha Kitt, the mehitabel, in the sort of plush pussycat outfit misguided ladies sometimes wear to masquerades. Mr. Bracken is Times Square collegiate, in shades of brown. Miss Kitt's admirers were calling her "feline" long before "Shinbone Alley" was thought of, and she is still doin' what comes naturally.

Melancholy Missing.

To use a phrase that has been worked to death in show business circles, but comes in handy at the moment, it is impossible to "identify with" the characters. They aren't, miraculously, insects and cats, and they aren't people. Archy didn't think much of people, but he wasn't one for hollow compromises, either. The actors in "Shinbone Alley" look like the actors in "Guys and Dolls" and a dozen other shows, and they seem to be involved in a rather cluttered revue. Joe Dorion and Mel Brooks, who wrote the book, have not made a coherent narrative out af archy's attempts to guide mehitabel to the paths of respectability.

I won't pretend that Mr. Marquis tales are a clear green page in my memory book, but I do seem to recall that a fierce melancholy flickered through his nonsense. There isn't much of that in "Shinbone Alley. It is sometimes dull, sometimes cute and peppy, and always—well, Broadway.

(Incidentally, George Kleinsinger, the composer, and Mr. Darion, the lyric man, got considerably more of the true Marquis flavor in a previous work based on this material. In their "archy and mehitabel," billed as "a back alley opera," and recorded by Columbia, mehitabel cries: "Why does life have to be one darn litter after another? After all, I'm an artist." She also says: "The eternal struggle between life and art is wearing me out." In that simpler context, those cries mean something.)

Excellent Ballet.

Still, "Shinbone Alley" has its moments. Every now and then something authentically Marquis breaks through: Eddie Bracken singing about the moth penetrating the secret heart of the flame; fleeting impressions of real animal movement, in Miss Kitt's acting, and in Rod Alexander's choreography. The ladies agitate their feather boas, and one could swear that the fur was flying. There is an excellent "Dog and Cat Ballet," with Jacques d'Amboise brilliantly interpreting a fighting tom. Allegra Kent is charming as an innocent kitten in another dance involving Mr. d'Amboise.

Miss Kitt's mehitabel is not precisely a gallant, bedraggled creature with a limp in her left hind leg, defiantly dancing on the cobblestones in the savage face of the city's icy winds. Nevertheless, Miss Kitt is indisputably cat-like, she is a glittering performer, her singing of "Toujours Gai" is a wonderful thing to hear, and she makes the most of her opportunities, which range from the amusing but irrelevant (as when she recites Shakespeare to an alley beat), to the precisely right (as when she is glimpsed, in her pampered house cat role, sulkily sipping milk through a straw).

Mr. Bracken is wistful and appealing throughout, and he teams expertly with Miss Kitt in a "Flotsam and Jetsam" number, Saturday night's showstopper. As for the vital consideration, I have no idea as to how an actor should go about the task of impersonating a cockroach.

Journal American
April 15, 1957

Play a Near-Miss But Talent's Fine

By JOHN McCLAIN

THERE were several moments, during the unveiling of "Shinbone Alley" at the Broadway Theatre Saturday night, when it appeared that something quite fresh and exciting had come to the musical comedy stage. But unhappily for me, at least, these intervals were overshadowed by a floundering book and a curiously lacklustre score. This is particularly regrettable for the over-all idea is a good one and the people involved are talented and attractive. It must nevertheless be registered on my ballot as a near miss.

Everybody is aware by now that the story is based on the late Don Marquis' "archy and mehitabel" series which occupied his column for years in the old New York Sun. Archy is a cockroach, a poet and writer reincarnate, who laboriously types his messages in a newspaper office using only lower case letters since he can't handle the shift key. Mehitabel is an alley cat, a black and beguiling lady who leaves a trail of broken feline hearts in her wake.

Archy despairs of her promiscuity, constantly urging her to find a respectable situation in a household, but her primeval urge is too compelling and she winds up in the end back on "Shinbone Alley."

There is certainly nothing wrong with this conception, and many things, such as the costumes, much of the choreography, the casting, and several segregated bits and numbers are original and completely in character. But there are long lapses when the story falters, when the music becomes something less than inspired, and the magic skein is broken.

In the leading roles are Eartha Kitt and Eddie Bracken, and a more fortunate combination can barely be imagined. Miss Kitt is a brilliant song stylist and an exceptional dancer with the sinuous grace of a tigress. Bracken has long perfected the role of the shy and baffled do-gooder, and he can also dance acceptably and sing. They have a number together called "Flotsam and Jetsam," sheer artistry, which held up the proceedings for endless encores.

Bright Moments

On her own, Miss Kitt scored with "Toujours Gai," "A Woman Wouldn't Be a Woman," "Pretty Kitty" and "Be a Pussycat." Bracken has his innings with the "Suicide Song," "The Lightning Bug Song," "The Moth Song," "Quiet Street" and he also contributes the familiar drunken number for which he has become justly famous.

Jacques D'Amboise is a new and extremely gifted dancer, and he has a capable partner in Allegra Kent; Erik Rhodes is delightful as a cat impresario; George S. Irving has a couple of bright moments in the first act, but seems to become lost as the evening wears on; Ross Martin is excellent as Broadway, the lightning bug, and Gwen Harmon is an attractive and vocal cat.

The costumes are first rate, imaginative and fetching, and Rod Alexander's dances catch the quaint quality of this world of animals and insects. Norman Lloyd, who relinquished his post as director, was not listed in the playbill; in fact this is the first show in recent memory which apparently staged itself.

Perhaps that is part of the trouble with "Shinbone." It emerges as several brilliant bits—but the music and the continuity are lacking. Regrettably it doesn't add up to a very satisfying evening in the theatre.

1957 CRITICS' CIRCLE AWARD WINNERS

Best American Play

"LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT"

Best Musical

"THE MOST HAPPY FELLA"

Best Foreign Play

"THE WALTZ OF THE TOREADORS"